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The Training and Use of Service Dogs in Occupational Therapy Education

Abstract

The purpose of this study is to describe the role of occupational therapy fieldwork students in the training of service dogs. Ethnography is an approach that strives to explore and describe the point of view of people. Ethnographers view the researcher as an instrument to gain insight into the subject. This researcher utilized her own experiences as an occupational therapist, an occupational therapy educator, and as a volunteer dog trainer of service dogs. She then validated the process through interviews with key informants. The results indicate that occupational therapists and occupational therapy students are capable of playing a significant role in the training and placement of service dogs. During a level I experience, occupational therapy students experienced the importance that a dog can play in a person's life as a tool of adaptation. They also learned advocacy and professionalism and applied the Person-Environment-Occupation model of practice. In addition, students recognized that barriers exist in the use of service dogs.

Keywords

fieldwork, assistive technology, ethnography, Person-Environment-Occupation Model of Practice

Credentials Display and Country

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The Americans with Disabilities Act is in existence to enhance opportunities and increase independence for individuals with disabilities. Since the passage of this act, the creation and marketing of assistive technology for individuals with mobility impairments have increased. The use of assistive devices may meet the needs of many individuals with disabilities. Everyday activities, such as picking up items off of the floor, turning lights on and off, or retrieving the phone, can be great challenges to individuals with mobility impairments. Assistive devices may help individuals with these activities. However, assistive devices do not meet all of the needs, including the requirements of many activities of daily living (ADL) and instrumental activities of daily living (IADL). Social needs are as equally important as physical needs, particularly those involving direct interpersonal contact and community integration, and assistive technology devices fail to meet these needs.

The purpose of training and placing service dogs is to minimize the impact of a disability on a person's everyday life and everyday occupations (Sachs-Ericsson, Hansen, & Fitzgerald, 2002). These occupations may include ADL, IADL, education, work, play, leisure, or social participation. Individuals who obtain service dogs have conditions such as cerebral palsy, muscular dystrophy, multiple sclerosis, and traumatic brain injuries. Service dogs are taught tasks, such as pulling wheelchairs, opening doors, turning lights on and off, and retrieving the phone and other items as needed (Lane, McNicholas, & Collis, 1998). The service dog may also assist individuals with getting

around in the community (Fairman & Huebner, 2001).

Two studies further assessed whether a service dog decreased the need to have a caregiver assist with everyday tasks. In a 1996 study, the researchers found that a service dog decreased the paid assistance needed by an average of 60 hrs over 2 weeks. This is an estimated savings of \$60,000 over an 8-year period (Allen & Blascovich, 1996). In a later study, Fairman and Huebner found that a service dog partnership reduced paid assistance by an average of 2 hrs per week, resulting in a savings of approximately \$600 per year (Fairman & Huebner, 2001). A service dog may help an individual with a disability by increasing the person's sense of independence while also decreasing his or her reliance on others.

In a systematic review written in 2011, the authors evaluated published research that supports the use of service dogs for people with mobility-related physical disabilities (Winkle, Crowe, & Hendrix, 2012). The researchers found 12 studies that met the inclusion criteria. Although the findings were promising, they were also inconclusive and limited due to the level of evidence, which included one level I, six level III, four level IV, and one level V study. The findings indicated three major themes that fall into the occupational therapy scope of practice. These are social/participation, functional, and psychological outcomes. Anecdotally, the literature strongly supports the benefits of service dogs, but stronger research evidence is needed.

Fieldwork Education

Fieldwork education is a critical part of an occupational therapy student's professional preparation. The purpose of fieldwork is to challenge an individual and to help move him or her from the role of student to the role of practitioner. Fieldwork experience encourages students to apply skills and knowledge learned in the classroom to meet the occupational needs of a diverse client population. Fieldwork assignments may occur in a variety of practice settings, which include traditional medical or rehabilitation settings or nontraditional community-based settings. Furthermore, fieldwork assignments provide opportunities to introduce occupational therapy services to potentially new and emerging practice environments. Students learn to apply theoretical and scientific principles that they have learned in academic settings to address their clients' needs. Fieldwork also allows students the opportunity to develop advocacy, leadership, and managerial skills in a variety of practice settings. Level I fieldwork experiences occur concurrently with academic coursework and are "designed to enrich didactic coursework through directed observation and participation in selected aspects of the occupational therapy process" (American Occupational Therapy Association, 2009, p. 821).

The American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA) encourages using traditional fieldwork settings as well as emerging practice settings. The students' goals during level I fieldwork are to gain experience, to apply knowledge to practice, and to develop an

service dog training agency is one non-traditional community-based fieldwork setting that can meet the needs of occupational therapy education and level I fieldwork education. The purpose of this study is to describe the role of occupational therapy fieldwork students in the training of service dogs.

Method

Method Overview

Qualitative methods are typically used to describe and explain a person's experiences, actions, and interactions, as well as social contexts. Qualitative researchers are concerned with accurately capturing research participants' subjective thoughts, meanings, actions, and perceptions. Thus, qualitative researchers use strategies and methods to engage participants in active dialogue, and work with them in the activities that are being studied (Kielhofner, 2006).

This research used the ethnography process. The purpose of ethnography is to discover and describe the point of view of people or a social group. Ethnography is an evolving process. Ethnographers use their experiences and reactions as a method of gaining insight into the people and the settings that are the subjects of the study. The primary characteristics that distinguish the ethnographic process from other methods of study are a quest for the naturally occurring language, the insiders' viewpoints and values, and cultural patterns (Kielhofner, 2006). In ethnography, the researcher tells the story informally as a "storyteller" (Creswell, 1998). Ethnography is a description and interpretation of a system or a particular social group. As a process, ethnography typically involves prolonged observation of the

group through self- participation in which the researcher is immersed in the day-to-day lives of the group or through one-on-one interviews with various group members. The researcher engages in extensive fieldwork, gathering information through participation, observation, and interviews. The ethnographer identifies key informants, or individuals who provide useful insights into the group. Ultimately, the researcher utilizes a holistic approach by incorporating both the views of the players in the group and the researcher's interpretation of the group (Creswell, 1998).

Traditionally, ethnographers have used methods of participant observation, fieldwork, and interview to study a subject (Patton, 2002).

The Ethnography

As the ethnographer in this research project, I am an occupational therapist with over 25 years of experience in working with individuals with physical disabilities. I have specialized in the area of assistive technology both evaluating and creating technology to enhance the individual's abilities to participate in everyday occupations. I have had a passion for dogs as well, and a curiosity about the role of service dogs and the impact they may have on an individual's life. This curiosity led me to volunteer for Therapeutics Service Dogs of Oklahoma, a nonprofit organization that breeds, trains, and places service dogs to assist Oklahomans with physical disabilities.

Therapeutics utilizes volunteers to raise and train its puppies. Thus, as a puppy trainer, I was quickly immersed into the world of service dogs when I received Samson, an 8-week-old yellow Labrador Retriever (See Figures 1 and 2). I began

the training process when Samson was 8 weeks of age. I worked with a professional dog trainer attending classes a minimum of two times per week, and initially I learned traditional commands such as heal, sit, and stay. I continued to attend classes provided by Therapeutics and learned how to teach the dog such commands as pulling the door open, turning lights on and off, helping with the laundry, pulling a wheelchair, and going to get help. I quickly saw the impact that these dogs will have on individuals, not just by meeting their individual needs, but by meeting their psychological and psychosocial needs, as well. The puppy was with me in my home as well as at work and in the community.



Figure 1. Samson pulling laundry basket.



Figure 2. Samson loading washer.

I now chair the Medical Review Client Selections Committee for Therapeutics. The purpose of the committee is to review all application requests for Therapeutics dogs. During the interview, potential clients identify their needs and describe how they believe a dog will meet these

needs. The committee reviews and assesses the applicants and interviews potential clients. Applicants and dogs are then appraised to determine personality strengths and weaknesses, and the physical skills of the applicant and that of the dog to determine the best fit. This is similar to the occupational therapy process and an appropriate role for an occupational therapist.

I am an occupational therapy faculty member; I teach a variety of occupational therapy courses and I am the Academic Fieldwork Coordinator. In addition, I own a private practice where I work and consult with individuals with developmental disabilities. Therefore, Samson, the service dog in training, attended occupational therapy classes and visited my clients. The first course that Samson was a part of was Occupational Contexts. In this course, the students learned about the role of occupational therapy in looking at the environment's significant influence on the individual and occupation. The following semester the students learned about various chronic conditions that they may encounter as therapists. Many of these are conditions that they encountered in their fieldwork. During a later semester, Samson was again engaged with the students in an Introductory Course to Assistive Technology. Through these courses and because of the ongoing interaction with Samson by both this professor and the students, the idea of Therapeutics serving as a level I fieldwork site emerged.

I met with the Therapeutics Board of Directors to describe the purpose of level I fieldwork and the role that a first-year occupational

placement of service dogs. A contract was finalized, objectives were established, and two students completed 2 weeks of level I fieldwork at Therapeutics.

Triangulation in Qualitative Research

In qualitative research, triangulation is a technique used to increase the accuracy or trustworthiness of the data gathered. Triangulation refers to the use of at least two strategies to collect or analyze information (Kielhofner, 2006). In this research project, I was the researcher, ethnographer, and active participant. I drew from personal experiences, skills, and knowledge to initiate the project. To triangulate the data and further support the role of occupational therapy and occupational therapy students in the training and placement of service dogs, I identified key informants. Key informants shaped my views as the ethnographer. I interviewed the Therapeutics Executive Director, the Therapeutics Certified Dog Trainer, and two occupational therapy students as key informants on this project.

I conducted in-depth interviews in a face-to-face situation with one individual at a time. The purpose of an in-depth interview is to delve deeply into a particular event, issue, or context, and to probe the ideas of the interviewee and obtain detailed and objective information about the topic. Questions were developed based on the occupational therapy process and the role of occupational therapy fieldwork education and its value and purpose (AOTA, 2009). Semi-structured, open-ended questions were utilized in the interview process. This type of questioning helps participants identify issues of importance as they probe and

explore. Limitations to this process include the time-consuming nature of this process, a respondents' unwillingness to reveal personal, sensitive, or provocative information, and the gathering of data that may be "off-topic" or that does not adequately address the study's purpose (Kielhofner, 2006).

Interview questions for this study can be found in Appendices A and B. Interviews for all subjects were transcribed and transferred to a secure electronic database. The interview transcriptions were placed in a table format. Data were labeled and coded. To prevent potential inter-rater reliability mistakes with coding, the researcher completed all coding. After the coding processes, the researcher further reviewed the codes to identify themes and patterns from the data.

Results

Interview Overview

Following the interviews with the Therapeutics Executive Director (ED), Therapeutics Certified Dog Trainer (CDT), and two occupational therapy students (OTS 1 and OTS 2), several common themes emerged. These themes included similarities between the service dog profession and occupational therapy, the use of adaptation in dog training and placement, opportunities for advocacy, outside-the-box thinking, a people-first approach by the students, professionalism, and the use of the Person-Environment-Occupation (PEO) theory of practice. Also identified were barriers and challenges within the process.

Theme 1. Service dogs and occupational therapy: Looking at similarities.

The Therapeutics Service Dogs of Oklahoma's mission is to "enrich the lives of Oklahomans with physical disabilities one dog at a time" (Therapeutics, 2010, p. 1). The current brand for the occupational therapy profession is: Living life to its fullest (AOTA, 2010). All interviewees supported and elaborated on the similarities between the Therapeutics mission and the AOTA brand. The ED said, "When this mission talks about enhancing one's ability to be independent, you may have 50 clients and you may have 50 different definitions of independence. What really counts is what it means for the individual." Therapeutics is a good fit for an occupational therapy student because the organization primarily serves people living with progressive and chronic disabilities. An occupational therapy student has the opportunity to know individuals with physical disabilities on an everyday basis, and can provide some insight into the resources that are available. OTS 1 stated:

I recently read a book on all the different things that a service dog can do to help an individual, both emotionally and physically. I really wanted to know more about the process. I would really like to train a service dog, especially with the knowledge that I will have after I graduate. Knowledge about the environment, and occupation, and just weaving that into the knowledge I already have. That is why I picked Therapeutics as my fieldwork site.

Theme 2. Adaptation.

Fieldwork at Therapeutics provided the students the opportunity to learn about the dogs as an assistive technology. OTS 1 stated, "The dog is the ultimate adaptation tool. It can be a friend to provide emotional support but it can also do things for the individual like open cabinets, retrieve things off shelves, and it opens up the doors for social interactions." At times, people can be apprehensive about approaching an individual in a wheelchair but the presence of the dog helps to break down the barriers. OTS 2 stated:

Service dogs are similar to an adaptive technology, and I don't think a lot of people know about it. I think it's probably one of the best ways to be independent and not have to rely on someone else, and yet, the person also has a companion.

The trainers and staff of Therapeutics at times feel uncomfortable identifying whether a dog may or may not be able to complete certain tasks for an individual. In addition, a dog may be of assistance to a person with modifications or adaptations to the task. The CDT provided a solid example of how an occupational therapist can help in the process of placing a dog.

The occupational therapist or occupational therapy student can assist with such things as modifications to the leash for improved handling of the dog or adaptations made so that the individual can provide a food reward

for the dog. Dogs may assist by

bracing for transfers. The occupational therapist or an occupational therapy student can provide insight to determine the best method for the dog to assist with bracing to meet the needs of the individual.

OTS 1 further confirmed this with the following statement:

As a student, I think it would be nice to be part of the team placing the dog with someone and to be part of the process of looking at the individual and how this person may be good at one task yet may need help with something else. I could utilize my skills to identify those client factors and those client areas, and potential problems, and then brainstorm on ways to help solve those problems. I think I could use my clinical reasoning to see what a dog can or cannot do for a person and which dog might best go with a person. I like going into a situation where there's a challenge and figuring out ways to help eliminate the challenge.

Theme 3. Advocacy.

Students had the opportunity to apply knowledge from previous coursework about the environment to improve accessibility of Therapeutics volunteers and consumers. One student observed clients entering and exiting the Therapeutics building and the struggles that occurred opening a heavy exterior door. The student researched options for

increasing accessibility to the entryway, collected quotes, and decided on a vendor to install the accessible door opener. The student also initiated a fund-raising event to help pay for the door. The results of this effort have been far-reaching. "I can tell you that advocacy work for our clients and even for some of our volunteers has been invaluable. I hear every day what a blessing having that door be wheelchair accessible is, and then of course, it turns out to be quite a valuable training tool for our dogs" (ED).

Individuals matched with dogs from Therapetics receive training during the transition process. The training occurs both at the Therapetics offices and in the community. While in the community, students had numerous opportunities to advocate for the clients. OTS 2 described the following:

In the community, the dogs and the individuals that they serve were greeted with funny looks. Many times people in the community were not aware that the dogs were working dogs and they do not understand the purpose of the dog. I found myself frequently explaining that the dog's purpose is to assist the individual.

Students frequently found themselves advocating for the Therapetics organization and teaching individuals in the community about the purpose of Therapetics and the purpose of service dogs. Students also learned about the differences in the laws between various states and the need to educate others about these laws.

Theme 4. Outside-the-box thinking.

Fieldwork with Therapetics gave the students, as well as Therapetics employees and volunteers, the opportunity to think outside the box, and think outside the book. The ED elaborated on this concept:

The world of service dogs and how they can help someone live a more independent life is kind of outside the boundaries of everyday thinking. It is beyond a wheelchair or walker or equipment and it is being creative in terms of using psychology, because really, that is what is being done with the dogs. You find yourself thinking like the dogs and then training the dogs. This enables the student to see how much more is possible, in terms of helping individuals to live their lives as independently as possible beyond what we typically are used to seeing. I think that as the world of occupational therapy broadens in terms of the people they can help through practice, the world of service dogs will continue to broaden as well. The use of service dogs is going beyond the boundaries that may be set by a treatment environment.

OTS 1 described the use of outside-the-box thinking in the following statement. "You can give your client a reacher or crutches, but if your client has an interest in dogs, and could use the dog for emotional

support as well as for physical support, this may be the best.” Staff and students elaborated on this outside-the-box thinking.

Theme 5. A people-first approach.

The students enjoyed working with individuals with a variety of disabilities and challenges. The attribution that was most impressionable on the students was how the dog could make a difference for the individual, not just in the area of physical abilities but in psychological and social interactions as well. “I see, as an occupational therapy student, how we are the eyes that see what the person needs, and I can view the person as a whole to identify what they specifically need to have an enjoyable life” (OTS 2). The ED added:

I think as Therapetics staff at times we get stuck in this rut: we train dogs; we place dogs; we make sure the dog stays trained. Are we missing something? Are we just looking at clients to see how they can handle dogs, or should we be looking at them from a holistic standpoint? I am not necessarily talking about changing the Therapetics mission to be a social work organization, but I do think we could be doing things better than just giving an individual a trained dog. I see this as an area in which occupational therapy can assist us.

The students were natural at seeing the clients as people first. They saw the person not just as a

very careful about positioning themselves when they're working with the person in a wheelchair by not looming or standing over them. Both students would consistently position themselves at eye level with their client” (CDT).

Theme 6. Professionalism.

Fieldwork with Therapetics gave the students the opportunity to be self-directed learners. Both the ED and CDT identified several situations in which the students initiated activities or changes on behalf of the organization. Many of the wheelchairs used for training at Therapetics were in disrepair. The students researched the repairs needed and completed the repairs. In addition, the students created new wheelchair cushions for these wheelchairs to improve the wheelchair user's comfort. This provided students with the opportunity to develop skills and test their confidence level through autonomous practice.

Clients receiving dogs from Therapetics must complete a succession of quizzes. Many of the clients are not able to read or write and need assistance. The students took it upon themselves to assist the clients with these quizzes. The acquisition of a wheelchair accessible door, which was previously described, was also a result of a student's ability to self-start. In summary, this fieldwork provided the opportunity for students to develop professional skills and demonstrate their abilities as self-directed learners.

Theme 7: Person-Environment-Occupation model of practice.

The profession of occupational therapy has various models or theories that provide a foundation for practice. The students identified the Person-

Environment-Occupation (PEO) model of practice as one that strongly guided them during their fieldwork experiences with Therapeutics. Theory in occupational therapy provides a framework to help understand the factors that influence performance, including the person, environment, and occupation factors. The PEO theory acknowledges a number of factors that influence performance: The attributes of the person, such as the physical, social, and affective components; the occupation, task, or activity that is being completed; and the environment, which may include the physical, social, or cultural environment in which the occupation is taking place. The ultimate goal is “enhanced occupational performance” (Law, 1996).

Students applied the PEO model to this fieldwork experience. OTS 2 described how a service dog would assist a client with submitting papers. The fieldwork student worked with the client, who attends school, on teaching the dog how to deliver papers to the instructor. OTS 1 agreed with the use of the PEO model.

I think that the person, the environment, and the occupation should have to match up and when you are talking about a person with the service dog, they are like one unit, so they both become the person and they have to work together. You need to prepare the person as well as the dog, and you train them to work together. Because of this, there is an entire new set of environmental issues, not just for the person but for the dog as well. I also think that the

occupation becomes different because the dog is involved in the occupation so the dog has to become just as prepared to do the occupation as a person is, and they have to learn how to do it together. Then the occupation becomes the just right task for the dog and the person. The dog and the person become a team that works really well together, and things just start to flow and become really great.

Unexpected Barriers

The experience at Therapeutics gave the students the opportunity to see the importance of preparedness for the dogs. They learned that training the dogs is not easy and that the dogs will not solve all of the person’s problems. “The magic is not going to just happen instantly. They (the clients) have just as much a responsibility to the dogs as the dogs have to them” (OTS 1). The students saw the type of training the individuals need before they receive the dog. They also saw the many potential roles of the occupational therapist to prepare both the person and the dog for the transition.

Discussion

The role of the occupational therapist and the use of service dogs in practice may be considered an emerging area of practice for occupational therapists. A review of literature, and more specifically a systematic review, confirmed the limited research in this area (Winkle et al., 2012). This research used an ethnographic approach to delve into the role of occupational

therapy students in the training and placement of service dogs, as well as the potential use of service dog training agencies as a level I fieldwork site. This research concluded that fieldwork completed at Therapeutics Service Dogs of Oklahoma was a positive experience that reinforced the PEO model of practice, as well as advocacy, professionalism, and outside-the-box thinking. It should be noted that service dog training organizations utilize a variety of techniques and strategies in the training and placement of dogs. Therefore, each situation is unique and needs to be assessed for the appropriateness of student placement. More extensive research regarding the outcomes of service dog partnerships and the role of occupational therapists and occupational therapy students in the training and placement of service dogs is a necessity. Research should include more rigorous quantitative studies to thoroughly assess the partnerships, as well as qualitative studies to delve into the meaningfulness and perceptions of the service dogs partnerships. In addition, longitudinal studies should be considered to look at the long-term benefits of service dogs. This is an exciting emerging practice area for occupational therapists, and further research is warranted to support its use. Based on occupational therapists' education, experience, and holistic vision with diverse populations, environments, and occupations we are well positioned to take the primary role in championing and advocating for the use of service dogs.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to describe the role of the occupational therapy student in fieldwork in the training of service dogs. Ethnographic research was used to study this concept. The results indicate that occupational therapy students may play a significant role in the training and placement of service dogs. In addition, a service dog training organization may serve as a non-traditional community-based level I fieldwork site and provide a strong, yet diverse, fieldwork experience for occupational therapy students. The mission of Therapeutics, a non-profit, Oklahoma-based company, and the vision of the AOTA are similar. In summary, their purpose is to enhance individuals' lives in meaningful ways. During a level I fieldwork experience, occupational therapy students experienced the importance that a dog can play in a person's life as a tool of adaptation. The students provided advocacy for Therapeutics, experienced the opportunity for outside-the-box thinking, embraced professionalism, utilized a people-first approach when working with individuals, and utilized the PEO model of practice. In addition, the students recognized that barriers do exist in the use of service dogs and that the use of service dogs may not be the best solution for all. Occupational therapists empower individuals to live life to the fullest (AOTA, 2010). The use of service dogs in practice may reinforce this mission.

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Appendix A

Interview Questions for Fieldwork Students

1. What made you to decide to choose Therapetics for your level I fieldwork?
2. The purpose of fieldwork education is to propel the student from the role of student to that of practitioner. How do you believe that the fieldwork experience at Therapetics met this goal?
3. Fieldwork assignments may occur in a variety of practice settings, including community-based programs and new and emerging practice environments. How do you see the training of service dogs as a new and emerging practice area for occupational therapists?
4. Through fieldwork, students learn to apply theory that you learned in the classroom to the practice environment. Identify an occupational therapy theory and describe how you were able to apply this theory during your fieldwork at Therapetics.
5. Fieldwork also provides the student the opportunity to develop advocacy, leadership, and managerial skills. Describe a situation at Therapetics that provided this opportunity.
6. How did your experience at Therapetics enhance your professional identity?
7. What do you see as the role of occupational therapist in the training and placement of service dogs?
8. How do you see yourself utilizing the skills and knowledge that you've learned at Therapetics as an occupational therapist in the future?
9. What would you change about this fieldwork experience?
10. Would you recommend this fieldwork experience to another student? Why or why not?
11. I know you have not been on a level II fieldwork; do you see any way that this could be made into a level II fieldwork?
12. Anything you would like to add to the interview?

Appendix B

Interview Questions for Therapeutics Staff

1. What led you to believe that Therapeutics would be an appropriate fieldwork site for a first-year occupational therapy student?
2. The purpose of fieldwork education is to propel the student from the role of student to that of practitioner. How do you believe that the fieldwork experience at Therapeutics met that goal?
3. Fieldwork assignments may occur in a variety of practice settings, including community-based programs and new and emerging practice environments. How do you see the training of service dogs as a new and emerging practice area for occupational therapists?
4. Fieldwork also provides the student the opportunity to develop advocacy, leadership, and managerial skills. Describe a situation at Therapeutics that provided this opportunity.
5. What do you see as the role of occupational therapists in the training and placement of service dogs?
6. What do you think that Therapeutics did well in providing a fieldwork education experience for the students?
7. What would you change about this fieldwork experience for the students?
8. Would you recommend this fieldwork experience to another student in the future?
9. We talked a little bit about level II occupational therapy fieldwork. What do you think could be done to get the student more involved in the community and what needs to be done?
10. Anything else you would like to add?